Transcript

Mobilizing Movies! The U.S. Signal Corps Goes to War, 1917-1919

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World War I was the first modern media war. Film propaganda was not invented by Goebbels or Hitler but earlier on by Wellington House, UFA and the Committee on Public Information in America. It was also the first time military photographers went into the field as embedded reporters to record on film what was happening at the front. This is their personal story. A story that also testifies to the resourcefulness of these pioneering cameramen.

Among the belligerent countries in World War I, the development of propaganda generally was accompanied by some sort of wrangling about who would ultimately be responsible for it, the military or the civilian branches of the government. The United States was no exception, but the outcome was in fact quite different from the results in Europe. In the United States, the Signal Corps of the United States Army had authority and responsibility for motion pictures. How this came about is something of an anomaly.

Since the Civil War the Signal Corps was responsible for Signal's intelligence on the battlefield, so it was involved in Army intelligence, especially on the tactical level. Perhaps because of this, the Signal Corps was given authority over photography in 1881. The first role film still cameras were just being produced that were much more suitable for outdoor photography under difficult conditions. In 1898, war with Spain broke out and the Corset camera meant to Cuba who would take the first military pictures from a balloon. The first reference to military moving pictures is of a Wright Brothers test flight in 1909.

Like most units in the American Army, the Signal Corps was hardly prepared for war when it was declared. In July 1917, a photographic laboratory was secured near Paris, the staff consisted of just one officer and one enlisted soldier. The Signal Corps in fact had many problems setting up shop with their laboratory in France. The Chief Signal Officer reported in 1919:

> *"The Signal Corps was charged with the making of the pictorial history of the war. It should be noted that prior to the war practically no field apparatus existed in the Signal Corps for photographic work. During the first year of the war Signal Corps photographers were equipped with motion picture cameras purchased in the open market, the type of camera being determined in part by availability. Developmental work was done*

undertaking looking to a special field motion picture camera with inside magazine such as was demanded by the American Expeditionary Force. Photographic lenses were very scarce. Photographs covered the field for both still and moving picture lenses. Still cameras we had in reasonable quantity but plates, film paper and chemicals were a source of considerable anxiety, the chemical situation indeed being frequently serious. A large number of the photographic chemicals had previously been of German manufacture. Substitutions had to be and were found. The photographic laboratory operated by the Signal Corps in Paris required large stocks of raw material which were frequently of American make. Difficulties of transportation existed in the dampness and climatic conditions were fatal to a satisfactory product. Care in purchasing and packing was constantly exercised with the result that a satisfactory production and delivery was made."

When America entered World War I an expansion of the photographic unit of the Signal Corps was to be expected. But the Wilson administration made a move that changed everything. In April 1917, President Wilson established the Committee on Public Information. The primary purpose was to channel all government information in the American media. Both censorship and publicity would be combined within one single governmental agency, with two mutually antagonistic aims. It was a difficult, if not impossible task. With abundant energy and enthusiasm, Chairman George Creel began setting up the CPI as a tool for what he described as "the greatest adventure in advertising."

Creel was a firm believer in public relations. Positive campaigning rather than direct governmental control of the media was his magic formula. The original order establishing the military motion picture units was the result of a direct order from General Pershing, head of the American Expeditionary Force. At the beginning of the war, photography played a minor role in Signal Corps operations, being chiefly considered an aid to aerial reconnaissance and artillery spotting. The solution to the Army's reluctance to generate publicity was primarily solved by the Committee on Public Information, which promoted its official war pictures with specially arranged publicity campaigns and premiere exhibitions. The involvement by the CPI meant that there would be an emphasis on propaganda, even if this was not what the Army had in mind.

In August 1917 official announcement was made of a photographic division headquartered in Washington D. C. The following officers were detailed to this division: Major James Barnes, Captain Charles Betz, Lieutenant Edward Steichen, Lieutenant Edwin Weigle, and Lieutenant Albert Dawson. The names of these men suggest how far the military film effort would be under the thumb of civilians who had been cinematographers or, in the case of Steichen, world famous photographic artists. It would be a far different military cinema than that originally envisioned by the Signal Corps.

James Barnes was a Princeton graduate, author, traveler and correspondent who had covered the Boer War, made hunting and adventure films in Africa and appeared to know everybody important. He got interested in aerial photography during his time at Princeton University where he had formed a flying club and on this basis was made chief of the Signal Corps photographic division.

Edward Steichen was an honored artist and a photographer who had almost single-handedly created the photographic movement known as the Photo secession. In 1917, he was sent to France to set up operations for aerial photography with the American Expeditionary Force.

Edwin Weigle was the famous photographer and cinematographer for the Chicago Tribune, had covered the fighting in Vera Cruz in 1914 and made a series of films covering the war in Belgium and Germany.

Albert Dawson had similarly been making war films in Europe all through 1915, having covered the German troops on the Western Front and the attack on the Russian Army in the summer of 1915 for the American Correspondent Film Company. These men were highly competent civilians, and the mark they left on the Signal Corps photographic division was indelible.

As America prepared for war the demand for cameraman increased significantly. Not every photographer was suited for this kind of job. Press photographers who could work independently and had a feeling for shooting the right kind of scene were considered most suitable. In January 1918, a professional school of land photography opened at Columbia University in New York City. Two months later a school for aerial photography was started in the Kodak plant at Rochester, New York. Recruits did basic training which lasted five weeks. Altogether, an estimated 2,500 American soldiers completed their photographic training during World War I.

At first they seemed to have been trained at Washington Barracks by Albert Dawson who was in charge of the photographic laboratory at this location and had made movies with the German and Austro-Hungarian armies before America entered World War I. One of these soldiers recalls how Captain Dawson trained his recruits:

> *“As I took this picture, I am not in this group. In some way Captain Dawson borrowed some motorcycles with sidecars and we were bundled into them with our cameras and drawered up to an imaginary battle line, dashed out with our cameras and photographed an imaginary battle, under the direction of the captain. You will notice the captain with his gloved hand high in the air, presumably holding up the battle line while the pictures were being made. Then we had to grab our cameras, dash back to the motorcycles and we’re whisked away to another point of action. This maneuver still gives me a laugh, particularly when I think of what we actually had to do overseas when our division was in action.”*

The story on how these American cameraman filmed World War I is astounding when you take into account the numerous problems they had to cope with. In April 1918 the CPI sent Edward Hatrick to France as a special representative to report on the motion picture coverage. As chief of photo syndication for Hearst's International News Service, Hatrick knew what was needed to direct such an operation. He advised placing a liaison officer with the Signal Corps Intelligence section, so more pictures would be made for publicity purposes. This would also make it possible to give Signal Corps cinematographers advance knowledge on what subjects to record.

Hatrick was instrumental in producing *America's Answer*, the successful second CPI feature film on World War I, and he contributed greatly to improving the official military film program. But he also was clever enough to understand this war was unlike anything that was filmed in our Hollywood studio:

> *"Taking war pictures is a more difficult thing than you'd imagine. That is, to get big, realistic effects when the fighting is going on. In the first place, if you take a wide range of a battle going on all you get is a lot of shells bursting. There's no way of showing hundreds of men making a charge, because they don't go forward in close formation. You're lucky if you can get a half dozen figures in the range of your camera.*
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> *Then the photographers, of course, like all soldiers, have to protect themselves as much as possible. A photographer wouldn't be allowed to expose himself unnecessarily, even if he wanted to. The first time I went up to the very front where there was heavy fighting, it was at Chateau-Yerry, we landed at night. We struck a village and were stopped. A colonel came out and demanded to know what the bang-bang blazes we were doing here. Say, he was one mad colonel. He let loose a volley of heavy artillery talk and said he didn't want any photographers or correspondents or anyone but fighting men there. He didn't want the slightest chance of our drawing the attention of a Boche observer, and then, shell fire. I didn't blame him. He was dead right. Pictures were important, but human lives even more so."*

To start with the cameraman had to lug their cumbersome movie equipment into the trenches. We are not talking here about a small video camera. The luggage the photographers needed to carry with them was a serious burden and it also restricted their zone of operation and speed of travel. One of the first cameramen who experienced this was Albert Dawson when he accompanied the Austro-Hungarian army on the Eastern Front during their attack on Russia and Poland in the summer of 1915:

> *"My baggage is a great problem in this line of work. I cut it down to the bare essentials. But even then the total weight is about 200 pounds. There*

are five pieces, not including the hand camera which I always wear around my shoulders. First there is my film camera that is packed in a box, second the tripod, third a packet of four reserve motion picture films also containing toilet articles, underwear, Kodak films, flashlights, a torch light, a box of cigars and a bottle of cognac, powder for developing the films and finally a screwdriver for my camera. Then I carry a big piece of hard sausage, or salami as the Hungarians call it, a couple of boxes of sardines, cheese, some pounds of chocolate, insecticide powder, a bunch of illustrated magazines from Germany and the United States, a red light to change the films. Attached to all this baggage, I have a big and warm traveling blanket which is made of camel hair. My biggest piece of luggage is a sack of about three feet high, made of brown sailing cloth. There are handles on both sides. In it, there is my reserve supply of motion picture films, as well as more clothes, a blanket, extra boxes of sardines, a sweater. It is always full. And I always need two men to carry this sack. Because there is no porter at the firing line, you better make sure you don't lose these guys out of sight."

The cameramen at the Western Front also had to cope with lighting conditions which were to put it mildly inadequate. This was not a war that could be staged in front of the camera with the appropriate scenery. Combat in the trenches usually took place at dusk or dawn and the military photographers who accompanied the soldiers into the firing line needed to be close to the action if they wanted to shoot anything interesting while going over the top.

Two photographic officers of the Signal Corps, Leon Caverly and Edwin Weigle, tell about their experiences what it was like to film the Great War:

Caverly:

"My collection of both movies and stills are growing daily with some very good stuff. Light conditions are very bad as it is pitch dark by 3. 30. Besides it rains and rains and rains with the result that we are knee deep in mud spelled with a capital letter. If 'War is hell', as Sherman said, it should be fought in the tropics to carry out the proper idea of heat. Incidentally, lighting conditions would be greatly improved."

Weigle:

"The cameraman may be an expert in his line and he may be an expert in staging and directing, but in reality the most interesting scenes develop and disappear before the cameraman can take his crank handle from his pocket and commence grinding.

I joined the division on September 28, 1918, and I had ample time to arrange my camera and had everything prepared to register an invaluable scene showing our troops going over the top the following morning, September 29. I had no idea as to the exact time they were going over, but my camera was in position on the front line at 5 AM and enemy shells were dropping everywhere, and I hoped the order for going over would not be given until daylight, but no such luck.

The dough boys went over at 5. 35 AM and it was so dark at that moment it would not make an impression in the most sensitized film manufactured. It was a case where darkness was safe and good fortune for the dough boy, but unfortunate for the cameraman, the dough boys gained their objective by daylight with few casualties and I stood where the dough boys left me, with the camera in perfect working order and with tears in my eyes, realizing that a scene so important for historical purposes, of which 100 feet would be worth a million feet taken back of the lines, was gone forever because of light conditions."

Under these circumstances, the expansion of the Signal Corps into film coverage was slow and painful. It was almost a full year before the Corps was creating documentary war films on a regular basis. The development of these photographic field units was also hindered by the Corps' initial decision to use cameraman with no photographic experience whatsoever. The general idea was these men would make better soldiers because they first were drilled and trained to conform to the military way of doing things. But there was no guarantee that under such circumstances cameraman sent to the front would be the best or even good.

Again the CPI stepped in. It altered the Signal Corps policy of only taking on cameraman with no experience. Following an investigation by the CPI civilian photographers with a proven record in the film business were commissioned into the signal core. Despite basic training the Signal Corps photographers remained a special outfit with its own unique brand and character. Although a photographic unit was attached to each American division in France, most of the cameraman worked pretty much on their own. They moved around in the war zone quite freely and for most of the time recorded events according to their own judgment.

Edwin Cooper, photographic officer with the 26th Yankee division, in his memoirs recalls how he had to struggle against military red tape while capturing the Great War on film. One of the best documented first-hand accounts, Cooper's personal story also testifies to the dangers of this line of work:

"I am sorry to say that the Army as a whole was slow to grasp the significance of our photographic work. We were sent out in the field with absolutely no instructions and had to use our own judgment on what to photograph. In fact the men in charge did not know. To get information was the hardest thing. Everyone was afraid to talk and I had to sneak around

getting what news I could find from the subordinates in the office. The average officer scoffed at the idea and had no thought of anything but his own particular job, but now after it is all over they wish they had had pictures of certain places.

I remember the first time the American soldiers entered the trenches I went into a sniper's post and got my first glimpse of no man's land. I remember I wanted to make a picture of it and presently got up enough courage to put my camera up over the top. I will admit that I did not panoram according to Hoyle, and I'm sure I hurried the operation a little too much. There was quite a howl sent up asking who was taking pictures without permission. My only excuse was that I had been sent to the front to get pictures and had I called on every person necessary in military courtesy I would not have reached the trenches until long after it was too late.

The Chemin des Dames sector from a picturesque standpoint was the best sector I had ever been The plateau which had been captured from the Boche was one vast expanse of plowed up, pockmarked ground. Every morning we would go as far as we could, which was the post command of the 102nd Infantry. Here we enter the communication trench. One day I happened to be in advance of the boys and was seated at a runner's post awaiting them. Presently I saw something coming over through the communicating trench sending out rays of light like a heliograph and before they had walked a hundred yards a shell broke very close to the trench. It was Sergeant Eikelberry and Painter coming out to meet me. The object which drew fire was the nickel plated top of our precision motion picture tripod. It did not take us long after reaching headquarters to find a box of paint and destroy its beauty.

Mr. Griffith with his wonderful war pictures, as it is not fought, has educated the public to such a degree that we felt we might at this juncture satisfy them, and we tried to get spectacular shots. But modern warfare did not take into consideration the photographer. From my experiences, war photography is a game of hide and seek. On the Chemin des Dames we tried to specialize in shell bursts. But the modern war maker just did not consider the photographer. Brady in the Civil War was handicapped in apparatus and had his subjects much more concentrated. The present long range gun has enlarged the fighting area and trench warfare is very hard to picture. It is more like hunting game. If you are lucky you find it, but the Germans simply would not put down the shells where we wanted them. War photography can surely be classed as hunting and you are lucky if you get it. Camera lenses also had their limits and the equipment in the early days was not as complete as at the close of the war. “

Facilities for the cameraman did improve during the war. As it was expected that most of the films needed to be developed quickly, the Signal Corps introduced special

trucks with dark rooms that were stationed in close proximity to the firing line. This was particularly useful for the processing of aerial pictures. Motion picture cameras were hard to find. As late as December 1917 the Signal Corps had only five working cameras. The Army at first took some Universal cameras to Europe and later bought additional Pathé cameras in France but these frequently broke down. A more reliable motion picture camera was needed that was light, sturdy and suitable for use in the trenches.

So the Signal Corps ordered additional motion picture cameras of a revolutionary nature made by explorer Carl Akeley. The Akeley Pancake Camera changed camera design and technology significantly. Nicknamed Pancake for its odd rounded shape, the camera featured a gyroscopic head so it could tilt straight up while the viewfinder remained in a fixed position. Akeley placed two lenses on the front of the camera, one as a viewfinder, the other as the film lens. He coupled them together in a way that allowed simultaneous focusing, something unheard of at the time. The camera also allowed the operator to change film magazines in less than 15 seconds. According to Scientific American, the Pancake was introduced by the Signal Corps as its standard motion picture camera.

By the end of World War I, virtually from nothing, the photographic unit of the Signal Corps had become a remarkable powerhouse. At the time of the Armistice 7 photographic field units were on duty on the western front, producing an impressive amount of film instill photographs. Indeed, it is difficult to confront the film collection at the National Archives without feeling overwhelmed. There is a huge amount of material still available and much of it is excellent. It is easy to think that World War I material tended to be made of propaganda shots of subjects and indeed there is some of that.

But a lot of the footage shows the truth about the war in all its gritty reality. The Signal Corps covered every aspect of the war, including four full length documentaries which were shown widely in theaters in the United States. And with all the defects of the CPI its activities ensured that combat photography would touch the heart of the civilians at home as well as drain the military.

In the European countries the military assumed increasing power over the dissemination of information as the war went on. In the United States, the CPI prevented this from happening. It was on this base that the magnificent World War II documentary films of Frank Capra, John Houston, George Stevens, John Ford and William Wyler were founded.

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